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Responsive Elections: The Effect of Public Opinion on Political Campaigns

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Abstract:

Political campaigns exist so that electoral candidates and parties can pursue votes, but what explains their content? It is clear that a lot of thought (and a lot more money) go into election campaigns, but the issues political actors focus on and those that they avoid are not well understood. In this paper we consider the responsiveness of the 2009 German Federal election campaigns to public priorities expressed through the “most important problem” survey question. Through the use of time series models of daily media reports of campaigns and rolling cross-section survey data on the attitudes of individual voters we find evidence that the 2009 German Federal election campaigns were responsive to public priorities and the attention of opponent campaigns. However, the focus of the campaign on the party or an individual candidate led to more and less responsiveness respectively. These results suggest that political campaigns dynamically respond to public opinion and each other, but that the nature of the campaign can lead to drastic changes in the level of responsiveness exhibited.

Keywords: campaigning, public opinion, agenda-setting, elections

1. Introduction

Election campaigns are finite and time dependent venues for incumbents and hopefuls alike to express their platforms for the purpose of achieving electoral success (Downs 1957). It is this limited amount of time and space that forces campaigns, like so many other political agendas, to prioritize by paying varying amounts of attention to all the different issues that are a focus of the party and the election cycle (Jones 1994; Jones and Baumgartner 2005a; 2005b). While the ideal may be campaigns that advertise a party's manifesto or that respond to the issues of highest prominence the reality lays somewhere in the middle. Clearly campaigns put forth the party's agenda, but they also respond to events, the public and the actions of other parties (Schmitt-Beck and Pfetsch 1994; Sulkin 2005). The abundance of information from the media, political parties, the public and other actors furthers the need to prioritize and the need to depend on heuristics in order to attend and process this information in a timely and efficient manner. After all, electoral campaigns like people and other political institutions are only able to focus on a limited number of issues (Simon 1971; Jones 1994). Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of using polling data in the study of elections the effect of public priorities on election campaigns is an understudied element of the electoral process. Its importance to understanding politics cannot be understated though, not only should the degree of responsiveness help explain the effectiveness of campaigns, but the degree of responsiveness to public priorities speaks to representation at a far earlier stage of the political process than how it is normally considered through thermostatic (Wlezien 1995; Soroka and Wlezien 2005) and other models of opinion responsiveness (Jones et al. 2009; Bevan and Jennings 2014). We ask how responsive are election campaigns to public priorities? While the role that political campaigns and even manifestos have in policy outcomes is less than a 1 to 1 relationship (e.g. Bara 2005) as is any form of agenda implementation (e.g. Bevan et al. 2011; Lovett et al. 2015) these mechanisms play a central role in our understanding of politics.

Despite this the content of political campaigns is rarely questioned especially as means for representation.

In this paper, we address the opinion responsiveness of election campaigns through time series cross-sectional models. We use data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) covering the 2009 German national election including daily content analyses of TV evening newscasts on campaigns and a rolling cross-section survey on a daily basis asking voters what their opinion is concerning “What is the most important problem facing Germany today?”¹ We find evidence of opinion responsiveness in the 2009 German Federal election campaign for several of the most salient issues. We also find evidence of by party variation and a systematic level of under-responsiveness to these most salient issues. Moreover, our results suggest that political campaigns not only dynamically respond to public opinion, but also opponent campaigns. However, in 2009 German national election the focus of the campaign on the party (SPD) or an individual candidate (CDU/CSU) led to more and less responsiveness respectively.

The rest of this paper takes the following form. First we build a theory of campaign responsiveness to voters and responsiveness to opponents in the next two sections. Next we present a discussion of the data and methods we use to test the hypotheses that stem from our theoretical expectations. Our time series cross-sectional analyses of the responsiveness of electoral campaigns to public priorities are followed by a brief concluding summary as well as

¹ The original survey question in German reads, “Wenn Sie nun an die aktuelle politische Situation denken – was ist Ihrer Meinung nach gegenwärtig das wichtigste politische Problem in Deutschland?” The literal translation of which is, “If you now consider the current political situation – in your opinion, what is the most important political issue facing Germany at the moment?” However, as noted by Jennings and Wlezien (2011), this survey question is responded to in the same manner as the translated English equivalent.

a discussion of the implications that our findings have for understanding electoral campaigns and the opinion responsiveness of political parties.

2. The Responsiveness of Campaigns to Voters

Political parties are crucial intermediary actors who connect the mass public with political decision-making. One of their most important duties is to take up voters' preferences and turn them into political decisions. From a normative perspective parties should be responsive to voters, as congruence between parties and voters is a necessary condition for political representation. While questions concerning representation and the functioning of democracy will always exist, it is hard to argue that electoral campaigns are not focused on representation or at least the illusion of it (Vavreck 2009). Moreover, as Downs (1957) notes parties strive to minimize the distance between themselves and voters in order to gain votes by changing their policy positions. Regardless of the actual degree of correspondence between what political actors claim and what they actually do once in office, election campaigns are designed to communicate the message that voters want to hear. Whether a campaign is intentionally misleading or is a tool for parties to communicate their goals with the public does not change their desire to respond to public concerns as cultivating voters is a necessary condition for electoral success (Vavreck 2009). Our theory builds on the assumption that electoral campaigns are responsive to voters' demands in parties' own strategic interests. However, in contrast to the classical proximity model, our assumptions about campaign agendas begin one step earlier. Building on the work of Klüver and Spoon (2014) we assume that parties not only compete with each other by altering their policy positions, but also respond to the policy priorities of voters like other political institutions (e.g. Bevan and Jennings 2014). While the party's own manifestos are one clear guide for the campaign agenda, it is all but impossible to fully and accurately attend to all the issues contained in a

manifesto through the course of a campaign. Parties are much like individuals and operate in a boundedly rational manner, which allows for the limited processing of information and issues as opposed to a fully rational actor (Simon 1971). This is especially true due to the abundance of information that is both available and relevant to politics that make it all but impossible to gather and assess every piece of data (Jones 1994). Furthermore, the limited human capacity to consider multiple issues and ideas at once is further transferred to group situations where the common approach is to either work together on a limited set of issues or to have a variety of issues filtered through a hierarchical structure (Cohen, March and Olsen 1972). The limited cognitive capacity of political parties is what forces parties to use heuristics and other shortcuts when making decisions. Public priorities are one such shortcut that highlights the importance of particular issues for the public. It is not a great logical leap that the issues the public cares about are the issues they want candidates to address and are the likely issues that individuals will base their votes on for as Pietryka and Boydston (2012, 739) put it: “Candidates who are out of step with the electorate on salient issues may be particularly disadvantaged.” This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: Election campaigns are responsive to public priorities.

Nevertheless, responsiveness may vary between parties and electoral contexts. As Manza and Cook (2002a, 651) suggested: “Under some conditions and with some kinds of issues, the relationship between public opinion and policy is strong, under other conditions with other issues, it is weak.” This contingency view should not only hold true for the relationship between public opinion and public policy outcomes, it should also be applicable to the relationship between public opinion and political campaigns as an expression of possible policy outcomes at an early stage. Therefore, we would expect the responsiveness to

vary between parties dependent on three factors: first the *popularity of candidates*, second *the fundamentals of the campaign* and third *issue ownership* discussed next in turn.²

2.1 Popularity of Candidates

Parties have different candidates and run their campaigns under different conditions based on the experience and popularity of their candidates. As research on the responsiveness of US Presidents has demonstrated, popular presidents are less responsive to public priorities as popularity is in part a resource that allows them to pursue their own policy goals (Hibbs 1987; Hicks 1984; Manza and Cook 2002b). In an electoral campaign a party with a strong and popular candidate therefore might also not be as responsive as a party with a weak, less popular candidate. The latter should have stronger incentives to fulfill voters' wishes to help build popularity whereas the party with a more popular candidate can instead employ a highly personalized campaign, meaning a campaign in which "the personality and the competence of a party's major candidate is the central campaign message" (Schulz et al. 2005, 59) and not responsiveness to public priorities. In the cases of the 2009 German federal election the CDU's candidate for chancellor, Angela Merkel, proved substantially more popular than the SPD's candidate Frank-Walter Steinmeier (see Figure 1).

2.2 Fundamentals of the Campaign

² As paper is based on a single election we do not offer testable hypotheses based on this variation; however, the remainder of this section offers important insights for the results presented in this paper as well as future research.

Every campaign is influenced by its political context or the so-called fundamentals, in particular the economy (Erikson and Wlezien 2012; Vavreck 2009). Normally, the incumbent party should prime economic issues only if it benefits from economic prosperity, whereas it should concentrate on other issues and try to focus the election away from the economy in case of economic recession. For the opposing party it should be the other way around with the need to deliver a message about the economy to voters only when the nation's economy has been suffering. In 2009 both the CDU/CSU and the SPD had been in a grand coalition since the previous election and together dealt with the consequences of an economic crisis. Therefore, neither party had strong incentives to prime the economy or the opportunity to benefit from a typical economic voting model, although the economy remained a highly salient issue during the campaign. Instead both parties chose to address other political circumstances or in Vavreck's (2009) terms "insurgent issues" that the public also prioritized and which allowed the parties to present a more favorable record to voters to evaluate their previous performance. In order to be distinguishable, each party should try to bring home those unique fundamentals to voters. In the 2009 election, issues with successful policies that parties could claim exclusively for themselves according to the allocation of departments between the parties within the coalition or as Erikson and Wlezien (2012, 9) wrote "the ones on which they can effectively take a position that the opponent cannot and with which the public agrees. This provides the opportunity for success..."

2.3 Issue Ownership

"If you are not advantaged by the economy, prime an issue you 'own' – whether ownership means your party is favorably associated with the issue or you have an advantage on this issue" (Vavreck 2009, 17). As we have stated above, the economy in 2009 did not favor either of the two governing parties and even the relatively successful handling of the

crisis could not be claimed one of them exclusively. Therefore, both parties were in search of other issues they could prime in their campaigns. Beside the issues following from ministerial appointments, the parties should also be exceptionally responsive to public priorities on the issues they own. Voters associate certain issues with certain parties, as these parties are considered to be able to handle these issues better than their opponents (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). Two issues are generally viewed as unique selling points of the two parties. In case of the CDU/CSU their ownership of law & order has been consistent for decades, whereas welfare policy for the SPD is a core issue that the party is built on.

3. The Responsiveness of Campaigns to their Opponents

The second brick of our theory on electoral campaigns concerns the parties' behavior towards their opponents. Parties and their campaigns are influenced by many factors, such as world events, polling and focus groups. Despite all these possible influences, no context is more important than what their opponents are doing. Therefore, political campaigns respond to the campaigns of their opponents, in fact in many ways they must respond in order to be successful (Sulkin 2005). An unanswered question or an unattended to issue can quickly become a problem for politicians given the speed of the modern news-cycle and parties recognize this threat (e.g. Butler 1998). Our second hypothesis therefore reads:³

H2: Election campaigns are responsive to opponent campaigns.

³ While admittedly the campaign may also shift public priorities we are careful that the temporal ordering of public priorities occurs before our measure of the campaign agenda itself to limit concerns over possible endogeneity.

As much as the responsiveness of election campaigns to the issue priorities of the voters depends on the popularity of candidates, the fundamentals of the campaign and the issues the parties own, the responsiveness to opponent campaigns should also vary between parties and electoral context according to these same factors.

3.1 Popularity of Candidates

Popular candidates have more freedom to maneuver and run more personalized campaigns making them more likely to lead than to follow other parties. In contrast, the party that is behind in the polls should be highly interested in the focus of their political opponents. This idea follows a similar logic like the inoculation hypotheses of Sulkin (2005), which says that vulnerable legislators will engage more in issue uptake, as they are most concerned in securing themselves against challengers. This should also be applicable to the party that is behind in the polls exiting a coalition.

3.2 Fundamentals of the Campaign

In general the party that benefits from the state of the economy, is more likely to lead than to follow with regard to economic issues. Although the party that does not benefit from economic voting prefers to downplay economic issues in general it cannot leave all claims unanswered and therefore will have to counter far-reaching claims or serious attacks by their opponents (e.g. Butler 1998; Sulkin 2005). In 2009 neither of the two governing parties could benefit from the state of the economy, neither could claim the successful crisis management exclusively for themselves and therefore neither had strong incentives to address this issue based on their opponent. However, responsiveness opponents does dependent on the distribution of ministerial appointments.

3.3 Issue Ownership

Just as parties should be exceptionally responsive to voters in case of issues they own, they should also take the lead over their opponents in case of these issues as well with the opponent party forced to respond if only to show they have a stance on the issue as well. In Germany the CDU/CSU should find itself following the SPD's lead on welfare issues while the SPD must respond to the CDU/CSU campaign attention to law & order.

The two hypotheses we present in this section offer a dynamic model of election campaigns based on responsiveness to public priorities and the interplay between opponents' campaigns accounting for possible variation based on candidate popularity, campaign fundamentals and issue ownership. We now turn to the detailed, original data we use to test these expectations.

4. Data

To test our hypotheses we use daily data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) on media reporting and survey responses from a rolling cross-section survey of 6,008 voters from two months before the election. These daily accounts of the German electoral process offer an unprecedented level of day to day variations in electoral campaigns as covered by the media and reacted to by voters. Therefore, while we believe our arguments should apply to a majority of democratic systems we have chosen to focus on Germany due to the detail and robustness that is possible through the use of these ambitious data gathering efforts. Furthermore, the data has been recoded to match the content coding system of the German Policy Agendas Project and the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) to facilitate the

comparison of our analyses with recent work on opinion responsiveness to public priorities in other institutional settings (e.g. Jones et al. 2009, Bevan and Jennings 2014).

In order to test our hypotheses we employ error correction models (ECMs) that allow us to model both short-run contemporaneous effects⁴ and long-run lagged effects of public priorities on election campaigns. Like in previous work our expectation is that campaigns are capable of responding to short term shocks as well as long term trends in public priorities and opponent campaigns separately and the use of ECMs allows us to test for these separate effects (Bevan and Jennings 2014; Jennings and John 2009). Our basic model can be represented in the form:

$$\Delta\text{Campaign}_t = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 * \text{Campaign}_{t-1} + \beta_0 * \Delta\text{OPINION}_t + \beta_1 * \text{OPINION}_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t$$

Where change in attention to a campaign ($\Delta\text{Campaign}_t$) is a function of short-run changes in the likely voters prioritization ($\Delta\text{OPINION}_t$), the long run trends (OPINION_{t-1}), and where the lagged value of the dependent variable (Campaign_{t-1}) measures the rate of error correction (α_1) back to the equilibrium level of campaign attention.

In our analyses we make use of daily electoral attention as reported on by the news media represented by a variety of TV news broadcasts to measure the political campaigns of

⁴ The inclusion of contemporaneous effects in our models is a possible concern given the short time period of one day we employ. However, our results for the lagged effects not only prove robust if the contemporaneous element is removed, but they are in general much stronger and more consistent. The use of an error-correction model with both lagged and contemporaneous effects allows us to better and more directly interpret our findings.

the CDU/CSU and SPD.⁵ For decades TV news has been the dominant conveyer of campaign information in Germany (Schulz et al. 2005). Parties have become accustomed to planning campaigns with their TV resonance in mind, while voters mainly follow election campaigns via the coverage they get on TV. In 2009 the leading role of TV remained unchallenged (Krewel et al. 2011). Analyses of the content of these news outlets demonstrate not only their appropriateness as measures, but the high degree of similarity with these sources. This is a common finding concerning the content of most national level media sources. Therefore we believe that the pooling of these resources into a single news agenda is both valid and preferable. Moreover as the content analysis covers the whole political spectrum of TV news in Germany from left to right, including two public service broadcasters and two commercial TV stations, pooling these outlets creates an average media agenda.

Our main independent variable of interest is the percent responses by issue to the question “What is the most important problem facing Germany today?”⁶ This variable which measures the so called “most important problem” (MIP) is included in the models as change or the contemporaneous effect and as a lagged or the dynamic effect to test H1.⁷ The most important problem data was gathered on a daily basis through the use of a rolling cross-section survey of sub-samples of 100 randomly selected eligible voters from the overall sample per day during the last two months of the 2009 federal election and as such is free to

⁵ Our focus on the CDU/CSU and SPD concerns data availability. While the GLES contains data on a host of other parties, the likelihood of other, smaller parties being reported on regularly in our chosen newscasts is rather low.

⁶ See footnote 1.

⁷ As public opinion over such a short time often tends to trend we tested for unit root processes through the use of Augmented Dicky-Fuller tests all of which strongly rejected the null hypothesis of a unit root process in the public opinion data.

vary between 0 and 100 by issue.⁸ Like many MIP series our series has several underrepresented issues, with some CAP issues only being mentioned once or twice. Comparing data availability between the MIP and reports on the SPD and CDU/CSU's electoral campaigns we determined that a total of seven issues contained enough data points to be properly analyzed. These issues are the economy (1), health (3), energy (8) law & order (12), business (15), defense (16), and international relations (19). It is important to note that MIP does also regularly list labor (5) and the environment (7), but that an extreme underrepresentation of these issues by the CDU/CSU and SPD in the media in 2009 prevents the analysis of this data.⁹ In case of the CDU/CSU, the relevance of political issues for its campaign in 2009 was quite limited in general. The Christian Democrats instead concentrated their efforts on their top-candidate, Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), and conducted a highly personalized campaign. The SPD in fact tried to emphasize labor market policy with their top-

⁸ Given the volatility of this data we also performed our analyses using smoothed data based on 2, 3 and 7 day moving averages. The results of these analyses provided largely the same inferences with one exception. Due to the inherent inclusion of multiple data points in these smoothed measures the lagged effects were often smaller or in the case of the 7 day moving averages disappeared as the change variable incorporated additional information concerning the lag. However, as we are interested in the separate effects of the change in public opinion and lagged public opinion we do not present these smoothed, but consistent results here.

⁹ Despite the need to exclude this data empirically that very need does work directly against H1, campaign responsiveness to public opinion. However, as we note earlier in this paper it is common for responsiveness to vary by issue, sometimes in fairly random ways (Page and Shapiro 1983, Bevan and Jennings 2014). While this does make the parties unresponsive to these two issues then, it does not necessarily mean the parties are simply unresponsive to public opinion in general.

candidate's so-called 'plan for Germany' ('Deutschlandplan'), but its attempt did not find much resonance in the media when it was announced (Krewel et al. 2011). The fact that environmental issues were underrepresented at the campaign is mostly due to the circumstance that the Greens who traditionally own this issue in Germany were not included into our analyses.

Our second independent variable is the opponent electoral campaigns. As the CDU/CSU and the SPD are often mentioned in relation to one another and in the same media report we could not simply include the number of reports concerning the opponent parties in each model. Instead to account for the unique and unshared opponent agenda we measure the number of reports on each issue not mentioned by the dependent variables party. The result is the unique change in attention to the campaign brought about by the opponents alone.¹⁰

4.1 A Note on Reverse Causality

Public opinion is affected by policy in a cycle that has often been likened to a thermostat with public preferences taking the temperate of current policy and suggesting a direction for change (e.g. Wlezien 1995). Given our daily analyses the possibility of our measure of public opinion, MIP, responding directly to campaigns is a very real. However, models testing the reverse relationship with MIP as the dependent variable show only a short-run, contemporaneous effect for the CDU/CSU and SPD campaigns on MIP in pooled models with both campaigns. By issue analyses are even weaker with only a marginally significant effect for the lagged CDU/CSU campaign on MIP in health. While the short-run effects in the

¹⁰ Alternative models that included the opponent agendas were much better fitting, but generally had poorer results. Despite the increased model fit in these analyses it was clear through further specification tests that the high level of shared media reports was driving these effects and that the model was misspecified.

pooled models means that the direction of our contemporaneous findings are in question, the lack of lagged effects demonstrates that MIP clearly leads the campaigns in the long-run further supporting our main argument. Based on distance between campaigns and policy as well as the differences in how preferences and measures of public priorities like MIP function (see Jennings and Wlezien 2015) it is perhaps not terribly surprising that this relationship only appears to function in one direction.

5. Analyses

To conduct our analyses we first consider the general level of responsiveness of the SPD and CDU/CSU to public opinion and opponent media reports. To accomplish this we make use of time series cross-sectional analyses across the seven issues included in our sample.¹¹ Our tests of the relationship between political campaigns and MIP responses are presented in Table 1.

[insert Table 1 about here]

Table 1 presents two versions of the CDU/CSU and SPD models. Model 1 and 3 demonstrate the contemporaneous (short-) and lagged (long-run) effects of public opinion (Opinion) on the CDU/CSU and SPD campaign reports respectively while Models 2 and 4 further include opponent (Opponent) reports in each model. For the CDU/CSU (Models 1 and 2) the results are suggestive for public opinion with marginally significant results for the lagged public opinion variable at the 0.10% level. No clear effects we found for contemporaneous opinion or the opponent variables. This supports the claim that the CDU/CSU primarily decided to go for images instead of issues in 2009 and run a highly

¹¹ These models are tested using panel corrected standard errors.

personalized campaign, focusing on Angela Merkel, avoiding to get involved in a debate over political issues with the SPD. This strategy of the Christian Democrats, which consisted in capitalizing on its leader's 'incumbency bonus' (Hopman et al. 2011) instead of staging a thematic campaign, was quite reasonable as Merkel over the whole course of the campaign obtained more favorable evaluations by the voters than the SPD's top-candidate Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Angela Merkel actually was the most popular politician in Germany by that time and voters asked whom they prefer as the next chancellor after the election favored Merkel way over Steinmeier. Only a small percentage of voters did not state a preference or wanted to see neither of the two candidates as chancellor as demonstrated by Figure 1 which tracks the public's preference for chancellor over time (Krewel et al. 2011).

[insert Figure 1 about here]

The finding that a party with a popular candidate is not very responsive to public opinion and opponent media reports is consistent with various studies in the United States that indicate that the popularity of presidents is negatively correlated with their responsiveness to the public. The more popular a president the less responsive to public opinion they have to be (Hibbs 1987; Hicks 1984; Manza and Cook 2002b).

Unlike the results for the CDU, the results for the SPD are significant across the board. In both Models 3 and 4 contemporaneous and lagged public opinion are positive and significant indicating that the SPDs campaign responded to both long-run trends and short-run shocks in public opinion. Positive and significant results for opponent reports are also found with noticeably stronger results in the short term. This finding is also true in relation to public opinion and seemingly indicates that the SPD is quick to react to short term shifts in the

public's and their opponent's priorities.¹² Finally, the negative and significant lagged dependent variable indicates a quick return to the average level of media reports for the CDU/CSU and SPD.

Against the background of the 2009 campaign the responsiveness of the SPD to public priorities and its opponents' agenda again follows our expectations. Although his standing improved over the course of the campaign, voters and journalists overall judged Merkel's challenger Frank-Walter Steinmeier less positively (Krewel et al. 2011). In particular at the beginning of the campaign journalists commented on him as being 'too pale, too unemotional, too stiff and too boring' (Spiegel Online 2008) and voters rated him 1.5 scale points worse than Merkel on a scale ranging from -5 to +5. Therefore it was rational for the Social Democrats to keep an eye on what voters wanted and to quickly campaign on these issues. This more moderate strategy was partially the result of the SPD having no real potential coalition partner they could join forces with. Opinion polls indicated that a majority for a Red-Green Coalition (SPD and Greens) was out of reach; the Social Democrats themselves had rejected to form a three party coalition including its left competitor the Left Party; and the FDP as Germany's liberal party seemed uninterested in a coalition with the Social Democrats entirely. Therefore, the only possible way for the SPD to remain in government would have been a remake of the grand coalition (Krewel et al. 2011), for which it obviously prepared by not burning its bridges to the CDU/CSU. As Walgrave and van Aelst (2006) just as Green-Pedersen and Stubager (2010) pointed out, the impact of the mass media on the behavior of political parties is understandable for strategic reasons. Our results suggest

¹² However, differences in the size of the coefficients between public opinion and opponent reports is primarily due to how these two variables are measured rather than any real difference in the size of the effect between the two.

that this also holds true for the influence of the voters' and the opponent parties' agendas on the political party's responsiveness.

Combined these results offer mixed support for H1 and H2, the responsiveness of political campaigns to public opinion and opponent media reports. While both hypotheses are certainly supported in the SPD models, there is only marginal support for H1 in the case of the CDU/CSU. In order to even better understand these differences we now turn to issue by issue models.

The results of ECMs for each of the 7 included issues in our dataset are presented in Table 2. For the sake of parsimony we only include the complete models for each issue by party in Table 2; however, the findings in regards to H1 are broadly similar as with the results in Table 1.¹³

[insert Table 2 about here]

Table 2 clearly demonstrates that on an issue by issue basis there is far less of a difference between the parties. While the majority of issues are unresponsive to both public opinion and opponent media reports both health (3) and defense (16) demonstrate some degree of responsiveness to public opinion for both the CDU/CSU and SPD. Namely, the CDU/CSU was marginally responsive to contemporaneous public opinion in health (3) while the SPD was significantly responsive to both contemporaneous and lagged opinion. For defense (16) there are positive and significant effects for public opinion in the short run for both parties and positive effects in the long run although they are only marginally significant

¹³ The only exception when it comes to the substantive effects is a decrease in the responsiveness of the CDU/CSU to health (3) when moving from public opinion only model to the model as represented.

for the CDU/CSU. These results suggest that when considering each issue directly, both parties responded to public prioritization of health and defense, but not other issues. While the difference between the pooled and individual analyses (especially for the SPD) seem quite odd at first they indicate that when the inherent tradeoffs in attention are accounted for in a pooled model the general pattern is that of responsiveness for the SPD and marginal responsiveness to long run public opinion for the CDU/CSU. The fact that both responded to the issue of defense thereby can be seen as an effect of the deployment of the German army in Afghanistan. After a NATO air-raid near Kunduz – one of only a few unanticipated events during an overall uneventful campaign – which was commanded by a German army officer and by which according to official NATO statements lead to the deaths of more than 140 civilians, a majority of German voters demanded withdrawal of German troops from Afghanistan. Both governing parties therefore had to deal with the issue and clarify what exactly had happened in Afghanistan. Although parties prefer campaigning on issues that are favorable to them (Carmines 1991), in the case of unpopular events that get high attention by citizens as well as journalists like the Kunduz affair attention is unavoidable.

The effect of opponent reports shows more variation between the two parties. Contemporaneously there is a marginally significant effect for reports in health (3) and a significant lagged effect for opponent reports in international affairs (19) for the CDU/CSU. The SPD also demonstrates responsiveness to health (3) with a significant lagged effect, and contemporaneous and lagged effects for law & order (12), but no effects in any other issue areas. The effects of both parties for health (3) along with the effects for public opinion show a high degree of interconnectedness between the parties on this issue. The context of the 2009 election here once again offers a comprehensible interpretation for the interconnectedness of the parties on this issue. During the period of the Grand coalition the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats agreed on a reform of the financing model for the statutory health insurance, the so-called ‘Health Fund’ (‘Gesundheitsfond’). As this project was a major

reform within the health sector and a huge compromise between the rivaling reform approaches both parties had favored hitherto, they had to explain their joint reform to disappointed supporters on both sides and mutually reassure each other that the reform was a success of the coalition partners, especially as the health fund was heavily criticized by the FDP, the front-runner of the opponent parties in the polls over the course of the campaign.

The CDU/CSU responds to opponent reports on international affairs (19) and the SPD responds to reports on law & order (12) indicating that the parties take cues from each other on these issues. As law & order typically is an issue owned by the CDU/CSU it is not a great logical leap that this issue is brought up by the CDU/CSU and the SPD finds itself in the situation where it has to respond to the CDU/CSU campaign concerning law & order issues. Whereas the SPD responding to the CDU/CSU concerning law & order seems to be a typical example for issue ownership, neither party traditionally owns international affairs. Nevertheless, the Social Democrats' top candidate Frank-Walter Steinmeier had served as the minister of foreign affairs during the grand coalition. Therefore a fundamental aspect of the campaign was the SPD's leadership on international affairs that the CDU/CSU had to respond to. It should also be noted here, that international affairs is typically deemed a low salience issue about which parties pay little attention to during campaigns in Germany, but in 2009 the issue's normal characteristics were beaten by a top candidate's position in government.

Like with the pooled models the majority of issue level models for the CDU/CSU and SPD contain a negative and significant error-correction term. Most of these values are near 1 indicating quick return following a shock. The adjusted r-squared values for each model generally fall between 0.3 and 0.6 with the notable exception of international affairs (19) for the SPD which is -0.013 showing that this model captures none of the observed variance.¹⁴

¹⁴ Removal of international affairs (19) from the panel analysis in Table 1 leads to positive, but only marginally significant results for short and long run public opinion with the other

This is somewhat surprising given the observed patterns, but is nevertheless a robust result with insignificant effects and only an adjusted r-squared of 0.023 in a version of the model including only opponent reports. Finally, also reported in Table 2 is the bgodfrey statistic for each regression. This statistic tests for serial-autocorrelation in the models residuals that can lead to incorrect inferences if present. Both health (3) and defense (16) for the SPD have marginally significant bgodfrey statistics indicating possible serial-autocorrelation. Further analyses of these residuals did not however indicate any clear time series patterns.

6. Conclusion

The effect of public opinion and opponent campaigns on the CDU/CSU and the SPD clearly varies. As our analyses of 2009 German federal election campaign demonstrate, public opinion (H1) and opponent campaigns (H2) have effects on both parties in, but in different ways across our pooled and individual issue area analyses. To put it another way responsiveness of political campaigns to public opinion and to each other is not absolute with the style of campaign the primary factor affecting responsiveness.

The 2009 German federal election was a unique, but telling election. With the CDU/CSU and SPD tied together in a Grand Coalition in the preceding parliament there was limited opportunity to run a more polarized campaign based on differing records outside of a coalition. The Grand Coalition made it much more difficult for the voters to identify who was responsible for which policy incentives. The CDU/CSU's edge over the SPD concerning the popularity of both parties' chancellor candidates led to a highly personalized campaign on the part of the CDU/CSU, in which it carefully avoided campaigning on controversial issues. The

results remaining unchanged. Given that this panel demonstrates responsiveness to opponent reports for the CDU in the individual analyses it is clearly important to include in the comparison of the two parties.

SPD on the other hand struggled to find a separate identity, or a clear campaign focus and instead chose to respond to public opinion and their opponent's campaign. The take-home message from our analyses is that the responsiveness of electoral campaigns to public opinion as well as competing parties is not only conditioned upon the ideological interests of the parties as earlier research has already shown it is also strongly conditioned upon the campaign context and especially the composition of government in terms of coalition models. While the majority of campaigns do not follow a Grand Coalition like the 2009 German federal election, the results from our analyses offer clear insights into the functioning of personal versus issue oriented campaigning.

Ultimately political campaigns are run to win seats and win elections (at least when it comes to major political parties). A campaign that is responsive to the public and to their opponents in a very democratic sense is a campaign that is indebted and likely willing to work for or with both actors if they were to come to power. A campaign that does not respond to the public in particular may very well serve their own party, but is unlikely to serve the wider interests of the public and the nation. Understanding how, when and why campaigns are responsive to the public and other actors when goes to the heart of representation if not democracy itself.

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Figure 1: Development of Chancellor Preferences during the Campaign in Percent (Krewel et al. 2011)

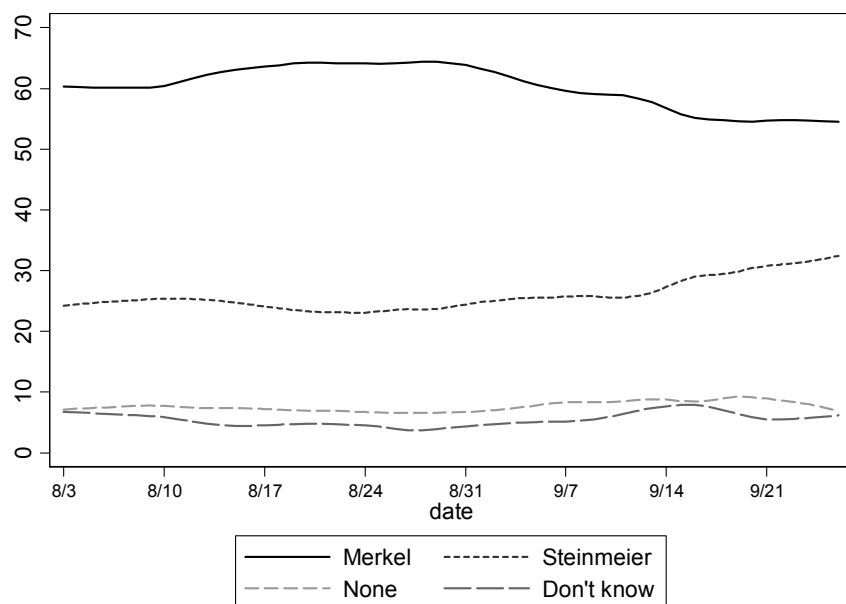


Table 1: Time Series Cross-Sectional Analyses of CDU and SPD Responsiveness

	CDU		SPD	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Campaign _{t-1}	-0.769*** (0.060)	-0.772*** (0.060)	-0.802*** (0.058)	-0.827*** (0.060)
Δ Opinion _t	0.022 (0.022)	0.022 (0.022)	0.011* (0.005)	0.047* (0.022)
Opinion _{t-1}	0.009† (0.005)	0.009† (0.005)	0.043* (0.022)	0.011* (0.005)
Δ Opponent _t		0.121 (0.081)		0.266*** (0.063)
Opponent _{t-1}		0.125 (0.102)		0.188* (0.086)
Constant	0.542*** (0.114)	0.453*** (0.122)	0.497*** (0.091)	0.360*** (0.100)
R ²	0.340	0.344	0.368	0.395

Note: † p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001, N = 399.

Table 2: Time Series Analyses of CDU and SPD Responsiveness by Issue

	CDU						
	Economy (1)	Health (3)	Energy (8)	Law (12)	Business (15)	Defense (16)	International (19)
Campaign _{t-1}	-0.896*** (0.177)	-1.167*** (0.146)	-0.876*** (0.147)	-1.022*** (0.139)	-0.782*** (0.135)	-0.610*** (0.135)	-0.588** (0.187)
ΔOpinion _t	0.007 (0.042)	0.050† (0.028)	0.028 (0.195)	0.024 (0.232)	-0.216 (0.280)	0.526** (0.194)	0.191 (0.442)
Opinion _{t-1}	0.004 (0.034)	0.031 (0.040)	0.040 (0.242)	-0.097 (0.294)	-0.207 (0.363)	0.362† (0.200)	0.319 (0.619)
ΔOpponent _t	0.195 (0.344)	0.059† (0.035)	0.405 (0.263)	-0.123 (0.294)	0.135 (0.169)	-0.001 (0.162)	0.573 (0.424)
Opponent _{t-1}	-0.285 (0.470)	0.049 (0.048)	0.181 (0.396)	-0.087 (0.355)	0.069 (0.182)	0.189 (0.243)	1.335* (0.563)
Constant	1.261 (2.273)	0.001 (0.057)	0.470 (0.331)	0.872 (0.696)	0.870† (0.489)	-0.110 (0.542)	0.192 (0.284)
Adj. R ²	0.308	0.558	0.441	0.468	0.345	0.287	0.147
bgodfrey	0.719	0.034	0.095	0.014	0.423	0.112	0.299
	SPD						
	Economy (1)	Health (3)	Energy (8)	Law (12)	Business (15)	Defense (16)	International (19)
Campaign _{t-1}	-0.949*** (0.156)	-1.259*** (0.131)	-1.195*** (0.149)	-0.936*** (0.139)	-0.687*** (0.136)	-0.816*** (0.143)	-0.234 (0.153)
ΔOpinion _t	0.038 (0.040)	0.148* (0.058)	-0.029 (0.198)	-0.111 (0.101)	-0.450 (0.286)	0.386* (0.153)	0.374 (0.344)
Opinion _{t-1}	-0.007 (0.033)	0.187* (0.082)	-0.062 (0.237)	-0.026 (0.128)	-0.115 (0.377)	0.371* (0.154)	0.263 (0.486)
ΔOpponent _t	0.336 (0.342)	0.099 (0.088)	0.294 (0.238)	0.570*** (0.097)	-0.057 (0.176)	0.199 (0.124)	-0.010 (0.176)
Opponent _{t-1}	-0.103 (0.469)	0.325* (0.127)	0.269 (0.336)	0.595*** (0.168)	-0.258 (0.229)	0.210 (0.168)	-0.092 (0.261)
Constant	1.953 (2.211)	-0.163 (0.120)	0.744* (0.313)	0.061 (0.308)	1.129* (0.515)	-0.264 (0.408)	0.200 (0.220)
Adj. R ²	0.379	0.620	0.553	0.634	0.362	0.402	-0.013
bgodfrey	0.858	2.874†	0.014	0.016	0.224	3.713†	2.118

Note: † p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001, N = 54-59 depending on first mention.